DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 425 FL 016 599

AUTHOR Lillie, Elisabeth
TITLE French for Business: Aims and Exercises in a European Business Studies Degree.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 17p.; In: Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (see FL 016 586).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bachelors Degrees; Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; *Classroom Techniques; College Second Language Programs; College Students; *Educational Objectives; Foreign Countries; *French; Higher Education; Intercollegiate Cooperation; International Programs; *International Trade; *Languages for Special Purposes; Program Design; Second Language Instruction; Universities
IDENTIFIERS *Europe; University of Ulster (Northern Ireland)

ABSTRACT

The University of Ulster (Northern Ireland), a multicampus university in an economically depressed area highly dependent on international trade, and France's University of Caen, developed a program in European business studies with French as a key discipline. The four-year undergraduate program enrolls Irish students with good French proficiency and native French-speakers. The first two years are spent at the home institution, with a summer school exchange at the alternate institution. In the third and fourth years, the students study together in both Ulster and Caen. These two years include time spent in work placement and in academic study in both locations. The curriculum includes a range of business studies courses with an emphasis on marketing and business-related French language skills. A similar program is now offered in German, and a Spanish program will be added. (MSE)

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FRENCH FOR BUSINESS: AIMS AND EXERCISES IN A EUROPEAN BUSINESS STUDIES DEGREE

Dr. Elisabeth Lillie
Campus Director for Humanities

University of Ulster at Jordanstown
Shore Road
Newtownabbey Co. Antrim BT37 OQB
Northern Ireland

(0231) 65131 Ext. 2179

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FRENCH FOR BUSINESS: AIMS AND EXERCISES IN A EUROPEAN BUSINESS STUDIES DEGREE

INTRODUCTION - BACKGROUND TO THE DEGREE COURSE

This paper is based on the experience of teaching a degree course in European Business Studies with French as a key discipline, in the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. For those of you unfamiliar with the academic geography of Ireland, I should explain that the University of Ulster is a multicampus University with a number of sites in different locations in Northern Ireland. The campus on which I work (Jordanstown) is just outside Belfast.

This situation has implications, on different levels, for the creation of degree courses that include modern languages. It means, first of all, that although not very close to France in European terms, our students can still reach the country, with relative ease, several times in the course of their degree programme. Another factor to be taken into consideration is the economic status of Northern Ireland as a rather depressed area. Exports to Europe, and indeed elsewhere, have come to assume increased importance as a means of boosting trade. Students know that if employed on home territory, trade and marketing will, in all likelihood, be central to their firm as to the local economy in general. Given the present commercial climate, the fact has also to be faced that possibilities of employment in the country are scant and our graduates may well have to emigrate to find a job. Bearing in mind this background, we have to ensure that students acquire both the capacity

to engage in export trade and, in addition, a high degree of personal mobility and while these are qualities that may be vital to the Northern Irish, they are also not unimportant to other communities. We, therefore, determined to devise a degree programme that would give students an intensive training in Business together with a thorough knowledge of one modern European language. We started with French and worked with the University of Caen in Normandy in order to create a joint programme. Students in our two institutions cover essentially the same ground and study together for two years: this means that, if they successfully complete all the exams, they are eligible to receive not only a BA Hons from Ulster but also a diplôme qualification from Caen.

STRUCTURE OF THE DEGREE

What is the form of this degree? Like most language degrees in the United Kingdom and Ireland, it lasts for four years and this is the case for both the students in Ulster and for those in Caen. The students who enter have a good level of French, one that would also gain them entrance to an Honours degree course in French. The first two years are spent by the students in their home institutions, Caen or Ulster, acquiring the foundations for further study. In this period some contact is made with the partner University through a short summer school held there. For Irish students, this takes place in Caen in the September immediately before Year II, while for the French students, there is a course in Ulster in the September preceding Year III. For the most part, however, students study separately in these two years. In Years III and IV, the French and Irish students come together to study as a total group and follow the same programme partly in Ulster and partly in Caen. The first three months of Year III (September-December) are spent in work placement in Ireland. After this all the students undertake academic study in Caen University. Year IV is a mirror image of Year III,

reversing this sequence. The first three months are spent by all students in work placement in France and for the remainder of the year they study together in Ulster (see also course diagram included at the end of this paper).

Within the programme, the students take a range of Business Studies disciplines with an emphasis on marketing, in addition to studying French in each year of the degree. I should add that we now offer the possibility of taking German rather than French on this degree and hope soon to offer a Spanish option as well.

AIMS OF THE LANGUAGE STUDY WITHIN THE DEGREE COURSE

Having set the general scene, it is now time to turn to the aims of French itself within the degree. To a large extent, the economic background of Northern Ireland, the business and marketing emphasis of other areas of the course and the overall degree structure determine the aims of language study. At the conclusion of their course, students should be able to conduct business through the medium of French in either an English speaking or a French environment. Their skills in French must, therefore, be slanted towards the world of work and the practical tasks undertaken in business. Should this seem too distant a goal, there is also a shorter term aim. As we have seen, students study in France in the third year of the programme and, at the beginning of the fourth year, they will work in a French business placement. These long term and short term aims are not in any sense exclusive but overlap quite considerably. Similar skills are required for success in an industrial placement to those that are necessary in the world of work. Survival in France also implies at least some linguistic attributes akin to those required to stay the pace in a French University.

LANGUAGE STUDY ON THIS COURSE

Traditionally in the United Kingdom and Ireland, language work on degrees was heavily biased towards translation into and out of the language with the odd essay thrown in for good measure. This pattern, under the influence of communicative approaches to language teaching, has been on the wane for some years now and a wider range of properly programmed work is normally found. It was clear that, as well as reflecting the business orientation of the student, language work should draw on good practice elsewhere in respect of communicative methods and structured presentation.

In devising a study pattern and range of exercises for the European Business Studies students, we had in mind the skills needed to implement our main short and long term aims - in other words, the skills we try to foster are those required for study in a French University and survival in a French environment on the one hand, and the skills required by linguists active in business on the other.

I shall consider first the skills that link to the period in France and start by focusing my remarks on study in a French University. To survive sucessfully in this environment, students must, most basically, be able to understand lectures in French; that is they must be able to listen intelligently to sustained pieces of spoken French. Secondly, they will need to be able to read text book and journal material on business affairs in French. Thirdly, they will have to write essays and other exercises on business in French. And fourthly, they will frequently have occasion to speak in French in seminars, to lecturers and, on a more social level, to their French counterparts. These are, in effect, the basic skills of understanding, reading, writing and speaking, but with a particular slant.

Turning now to another part of the time spent abroad, that is the placement in a commercial or industrial environment, it transpires that the language skills required for survival in this setting are not fundamentally dissimilar to those required for University study. Understanding, this time of shorter, more conversational or professional French is crucial. Spoken communication is obviously vital. There may, too, be some need to read material in the target language and perhaps write, in the foreign language, short letters, memos or reports.

It is in the first and second years that we seek to improve (although not to the total exclusion of other aspects of French) these skills which the student will require in Year III and the first term of Year IV. Year IV is then seen as a time for refining and polishing competence already gained as well as looking forward more fully to the demands of employment. For these reasons my paper will concentrate mainly on language work undertaken in the initial two years of the programme.

I want now to consider what these skills imply in terms of the practicalities of language teaching and the types of activity that may be undertaken to extend the students' competence in the relevant areas.

I shall look first at the understanding of spoken French which was seen as fundamental to survival in France. Although our students have a reasonable level of achievement when they reach us and have been given some training in aural comprehension at secondary level, they are not sufficiently competent at listening to sustained pieces of authentic French to follow lectures in the language. We, therefore, undertake a series of audio comprehension exercises which, in first year, we try to slant towards realistic discussions on contemporary or business topics. The material for these may be taken from French radio or TV (we are fortunate in being able to receive satellite

TV). Other exercises have been created on the basis of interviews conducted by members of staff in France or specifically devised discussions recorded by the native speaking French assistants. In second year there is a preponderance of more extended talks, anticipating lectures in the foreign language. We make up a number of written or oral exercises to accompany these texts. Remembering the fact that note-taking from the spoken word will be important to our students, we often use exercises where students are obliged to give written answers or reactions to the tape studied.

I should like to turn now to reading. Before coming to University, our students' training in reading extended pieces of French is largely confined to literary texts, generally short novels or plays, studied in some depth from a literary and linguistic point of view. Students find modern journalistic prose from, say, Le Monde or L'Express difficult and have to gain practice in dealing with this type of material. In questionnaires, first year students have judged authentic newspaper or textbook French as 'challenging', if not sometimes overtaxing. We work largely on dossier material compiled in-house and containing newspaper articles and extracts from textbooks on set themes relating to contemporary life and business in France and Europe. In relation to these dossiers, which may include taped material, we ask students to undertake what we call information gathering exercises (in reality a type of comprehension exercise). A business situation is described and students are asked questions linked to it. The answers may, of course, be found in the texts in the dossier, some, but not all of which, will have been studied in class. One of the aims is to force reluctant students into additional reading.

It should now be clear that writing is viewed by us as a skill connected to the other skills and exercised in connection with them. In addition

to the above exercises, students are, of course, given extended written assignments of one type or another: essays on a general issue or a piece on a business problem, for instance. Again these will be linked to the dossiers or a wider spread of reading. Finally, the skill of speaking must be mentioned. The course includes discussion exercises where students have the opportunity to debate topical issues with native speakers and staff and receive some training in the formulation of argument and the expression of opinion. On a very practical level, students also undertake role play relating to everyday and educational experiences in France (examples of this type of work include opening a bank account, dealing with accommodation, approaching members of staff for advice on study).

Having outlined ways in which our students are helped to acquire language skills necessary for survival in France, I wish to move on now to the other half of the language aims: the attempt to impart those skills essential in industry and commerce. As already suggested, there is obviously some overlap with the exercises just discussed but in this part of my paper I shall try to concentrate on new areas.

In this connection, it is necessary to start off by asking what skills are actually required by linguists working in industry and commerce.

There has been in the United Kingdom a relatively small number of conferences and reports on the language needs of industry.[1] Perhaps the most useful is a survey on Foreign Languages in Industry and Commerce undertaken by three researchers (Emmans, Hawkins and Westoby)[2] for the Language Teaching Centre, University of York. This work was first published in 1974 but its conclusions are still relevant. Those surveyed were graduates but

not necessarily language graduates as the aim was to evaluate the range of languages and skills currently being used in industry. On two separate surveys, the authors found that the three most important skills were reading, translation into English and conversation. Reading came first in both cases; translation into English was second on one survey, third on the other; conversation (which presumably includes business discussion and negotiation) was likewise second on one survey, third on the other. Other skills which figure were writing in the target language, interpreting, translation into the foreign language. Secretarial skills, which no doubt imply telephoning and letter writing as well as shorthand/typing, were also mentioned.

This was the main survey which we used in creating our pattern of language study. I should, however, mention two recent, if somewhat more restricted, pieces of work. A survey of the language needs of firms in the North East of England was undertaken by staff at Newcastle Polytechnic, the results of which were published in 1985. Again, an investigation of foreign language skills used in industry put reading in first place (other activities are defined differently and do not come in quite the same order as in the York survey).[3] Also published in 1985 was Linda Hantrais' survey of the careers of graduates of Aston University in Birmingham, England, who had taken either a modern languages degree or a modern language with Business Administration.[4] The skill areas are set out differently again by her and divided by language. The interesting aspect of her research is that it points to a larger role being played by aural and oral skills, although writing and reading tasks still retain very considerable importance. Also relevant is the fact that she found that "translation was, after telephoning and telex and message reading, the most frequently quoted task and that spanning the widest range of languages".[5]

These surveys, thus, highlight certain of the skills already discussed (reading, conversation of a general nature) which need not be further considered. One heartening signal for traditionalists is the prominence given to translation by both the York Survey and Dr Hantrais' research. Our course does not neglect translation (both ways) as we remain convinced that, despite its current unpopularity, it is a highly relevant vocational tool as well as a linguistic exercise of value.

Other exercises in this category of skills relating to the professional world do, however, owe more to modern communicative influences, are modelled on specific business tasks and cover a range of functional activities. The most rudimentary activities here include business letters and telephone assignments. At a somewhat more challenging level, there are multiskill exercises which make extensive use of role play in mock business situations. These are either devised by ourselves or based on some of the very useful publications now available in the United Kingdom (Export Marketing French; Business Situations French; Business Case Studies).[6] I take as an example here an exercise compiled by a colleague, in the course of which groups of students have to work on a number of tasks relating to an export situation (for instance, an Irish firm wishing to export a product to the Normandy region). Each student is given a role and there are a defined number of scenes to be played relating to the different stages of market research and negotiation. The students work out how they will present a particular situation and then they televise it. Afterwards it is marked and played back. We find that students enjoy this type of exercise. They are motivated to do some research about France and they learn to interact with others and speak about business topics in French.[7]

ORGANISATION OF MATERIAL AND LINKAGES WITH OTHER AREAS OF THE COURSE

As you can see, our degree has a strong focus on business and contemporary France. Where possible, as has been mentioned en passant, we try to group our language work into topics. Year I, for instance, covers a range of themes that introduce modern French life and the business world in France. This introduction to modern France offers not only essential background but relates to a more theoretical course of lectures and seminars on France today. There are links, too, with the more specifically business areas of the course. In Year II, the language work highlights first of all France and Europe, connecting with a series of lectures on European Institutions and the European Business Community. There is also material on Marketing and Publicity reflecting the importance of that aspect within the course as a whole. There are thus significant relationships between language work and the other areas of the course. One of the problems in fostering such links is that language staff are not necessarily qualified in business. We have tried to overcome this to some extent by encouraging staff to undertake a part-time Diploma in Marketing. This course has been successfully completed by members of staff in both French and German, giving those concerned a reasonable knowledge of business practice and the nature and problems of marketing. (Another solution, which we did not adopt, is to employ native speakers of the language qualified in a business discipline.)

While there should certainly be very close links between language and the other areas of the course, it is probably better that an element of separation should remain between the two rather than aiming at total integration, which some might see as an ideal. Students must reflect on the language they learn, on its nature and purpose. In fact, they need to be taught so that they achieve an awareness of the structure of language or, as one commentator (Lodge) has put it, students should "emerge with a knowledge

of language as a system".[8] For our purposes, this means constantly drawing attention to aspects of linguistic structure and usage in the course of other exercises. We did not feel it appropriate in this degree course to have hours specifically devoted to "grammar" or "linguistics".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, is the type of language taught on this course satisfactory or, at least, reasonably so? To be human is of necessity to be imperfect, but there are some signs of success. The course is one of the most popular in the University with a high number of applicants. Anonymous questionnaires to students have elicited praise for the contemporary focus of the language work and its stress on modern issues; "the change of topics to current affairs makes the course more interesting than school", said one first year student. The professional and vocational elements too aroused enthusiasm among students, including not only the extended business situations but also what some people might consider the rather dry tasks of business letters and telephone conversations. Students are motivated by subjects that seem personally interesting, are concerned with modern life and which have career relevance. And motivation is important; one thinks, for instance, of Hymes who speaks of "the role of non-cognitive factors such as motivation in the determination of competence".[9]

From the point of view of staff, the level of linguistic attainment on the course is at least as high as, if not higher than, that of students on a more traditional degree in our University.

So we may perhaps conclude that students are being offered an interesting educational experience and learning useful skills. Those staff concerned in the development of the course have been convinced of the value of devising language programmes that take account of students' professional aims and

the use of language in the world of work. Such programmes can have real academic merit and attract able and eager candidates.

ELISABETH M LILLIE

University of Ulster at Jordanstown

Footnotes

1 See, for instance, Christine Wilding, Languages, Education and Industry: a summary of reports and conferences (Birmingham: Aston University, Modern Languages Club, 1980). See also First International Colloquium on Language and Internationalizing Business Studies, Colloquium Proceedings, 5-6 July 1985 (Lyon: Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lyon, 1985).

2 K.Emmans, E.Hawkins, A.Westoby, The Use of Foreign Languages in the Private Sector of Industry and Commerce, 3rd ed. (York: Language Teaching Centre, Univ. of York, 1976).

3 Stephen Hagan, "Trading in Other Tongues," Times Higher Education Supplement, 10 May 1985, p.16.

4 Linda Hantrais, Using Languages in a Career (Birmingham: Aston University, Modern Languages Club, 1985).

5 Hantrais, p.25.

6 A.M.F.Nuss, Export Marketing French (London: Longman, 1979), Andrew Castley and Tom Wight, Business Situations French (London: Longman, 1982), Roderick Paton, Business Case Studies French (London: Longman, 1980).

7 Such exercises draw on some of the pioneering work on video exercises undertaken by R.Crawshaw of the University of Lancaster. See, for instance, R.Crawshaw, "The Evaluation of Oral/Aural Skills within the BA Finals Examination, Analysis and Interim Proposals," Bradford Occasional Papers,

No. 5 (1984) pp.43-63, also published in Oral Skills in the Modern Languages Degree, eds.G.Doble and B. T. Griffiths (London: CILT, 1985, pp. 122-136) and "The Exploitation of the Media and the Changing Role of the Foreign Language Teacher," First International Colloquium on Language and Internationalizing Business Studies.

8 A. Lodge, "What are we doing in Modern Languages Today?", Bradford Occasional Papers, No. 5, p. 13, (also published in Oral Skills in the Modern Languages Degree, pp. 10-28).

9 D. H. Hymes, "On Communicative Competence," in Socioloinguistics, eds. J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes (London: Penguin, 1976) p.283.

COURSE STRUCTURE